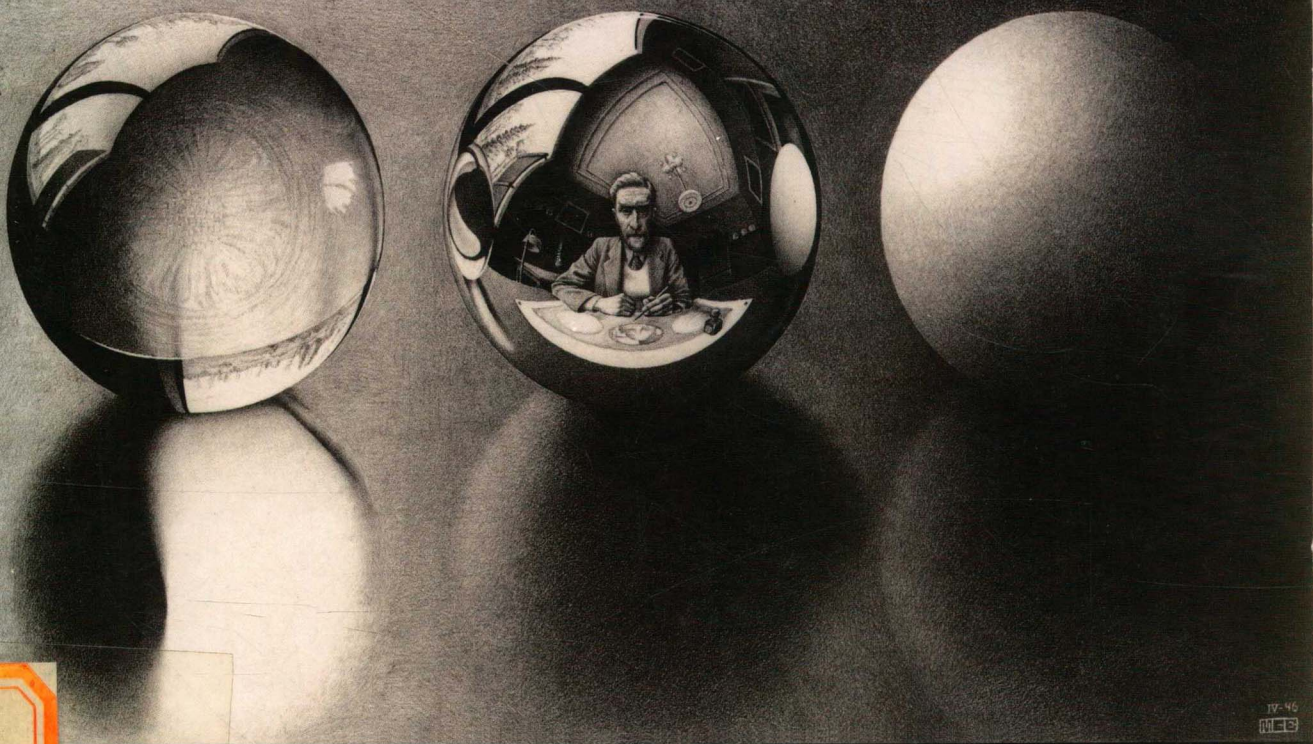


D r a w i n g

from observation



an introduction to
perceptual drawing

Brian Curtis
second edition

DRAWING FROM OBSERVATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO PERCEPTUAL DRAWING

Brian Curtis

**University of Miami
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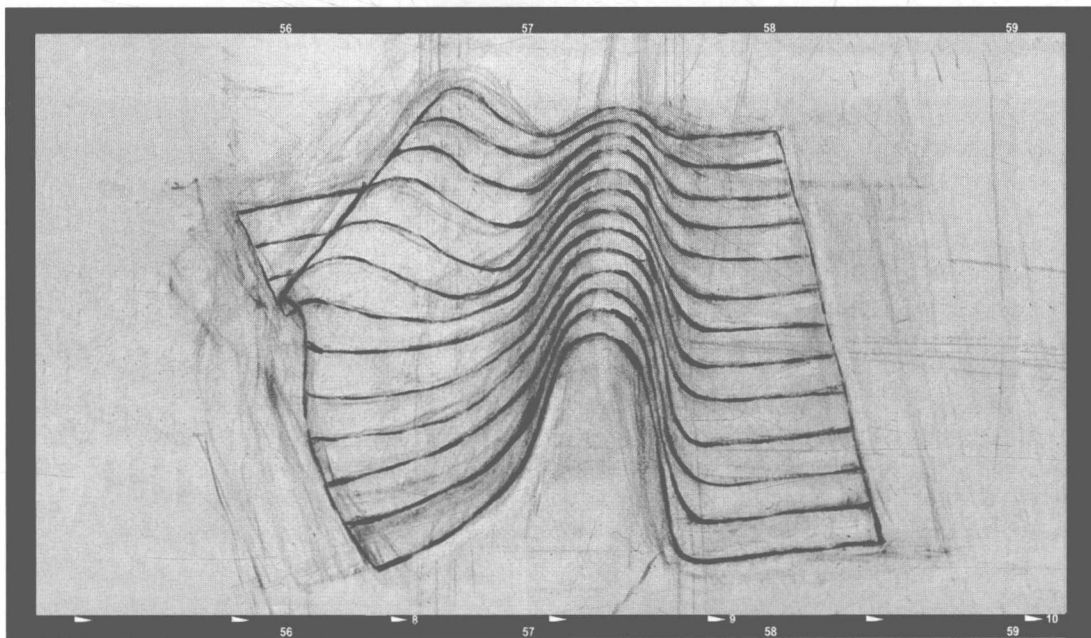
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My decision to build a perceptual drawing book around my students' class assignments grew out of the observation that the students in my introductory perceptual drawing courses consistently produced more focused and more sensitive drawings after being exposed to successful student projects from previous semesters. I attributed this positive change in their performance to two factors: the images presented to them depicted successful solutions to the problems they were being asked to address, thereby providing excellent visual guides that clarified the relevant issues of each lesson; and showing current students the accomplishments of former students generated a healthy sense of peer competition that substantially "raised the bar" in terms of what each student should expect to accomplish in his/her drawings. As a result, this book can best be understood as an annotated "slide show" that documents what beginning drawing students can accomplish when they focus intelligently on the task of learning to record their observations in a drawing.

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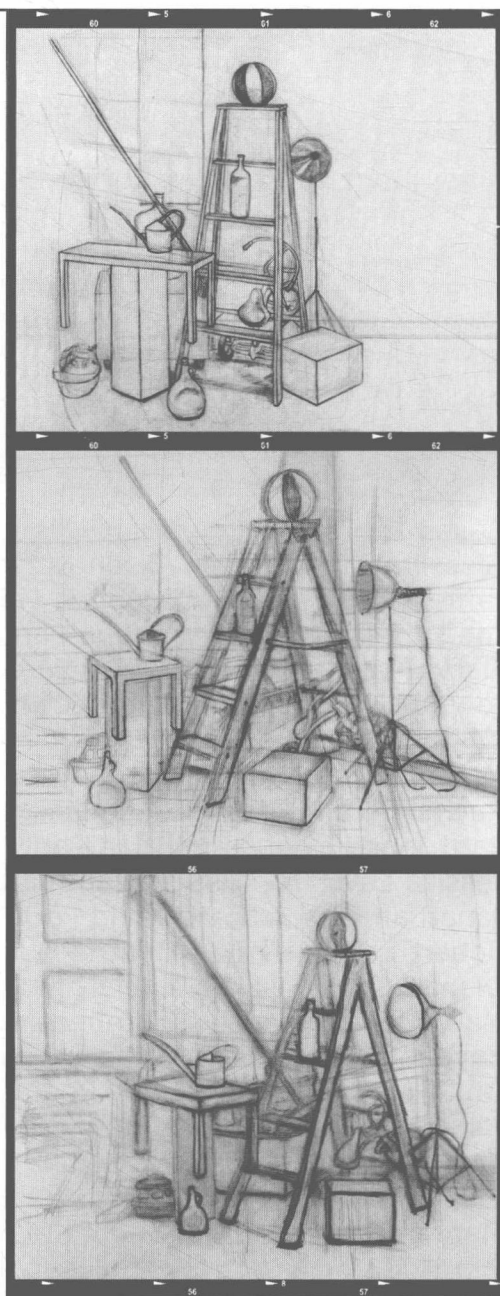
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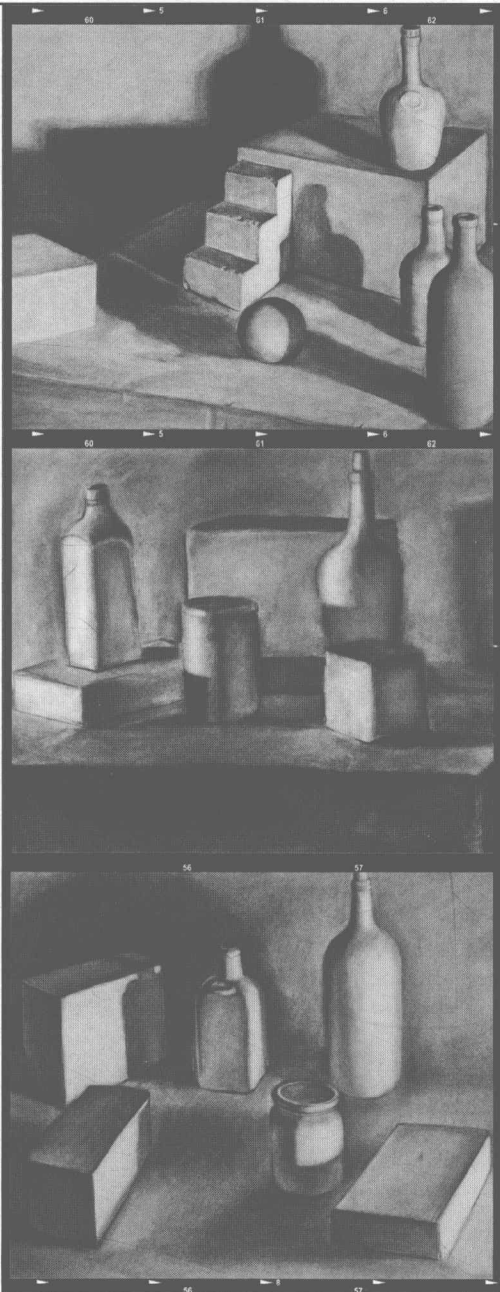
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I am grateful to Cynthia Ward, my sponsoring and developmental editor for the first edition, and Meredith Grant, developmental editor for the new chapter in this second edition, for their insight, understanding, and patience as they fine-tuned the words I used to convey the intuitive visual process that underlies observational drawing. They contributed to whatever clarity and cohesiveness can be found in the following pages.

I also thank my wife, Sue Kogan, for her loving support.



DEDICATION



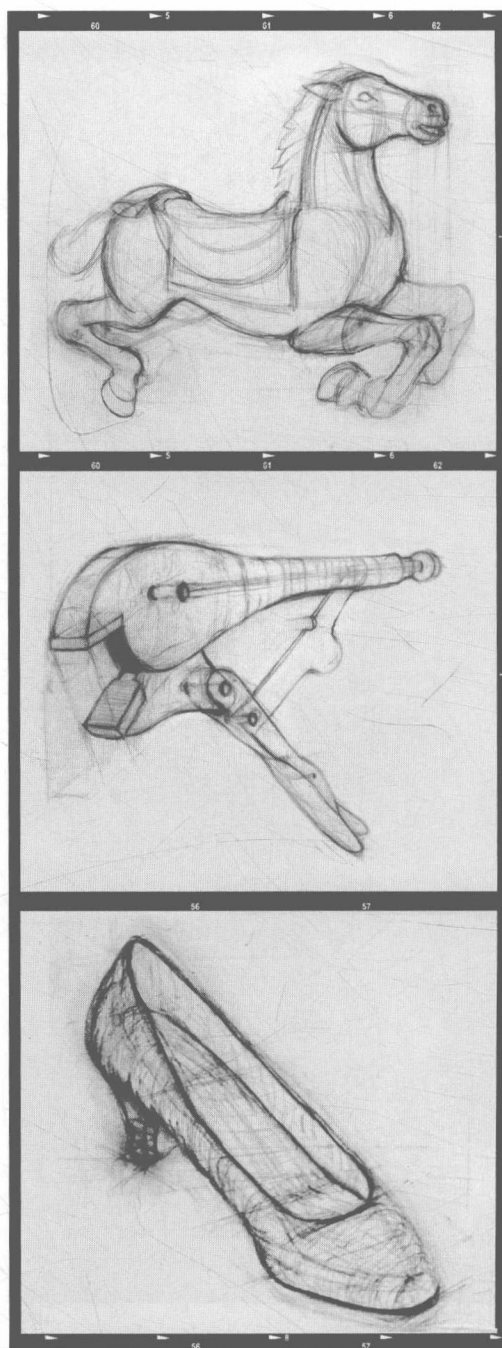
This book was initially conceived as simply a "portable slide show" of successful student projects that would, by example, instruct, motivate, and inspire beginning students in perceptual drawing. Over time the book evolved into something considerably more complicated than what was initially planned, but I am satisfied knowing that it has, at the very least, recorded and showcased the enthusiasm, energy, intelligence, sensitivity, insight, patience, and accomplishments of a wonderful and diverse group of hard-working, self-disciplined students from my introductory classes in perceptual drawing at the University of Miami.

CELEBRATE!

PREFACE

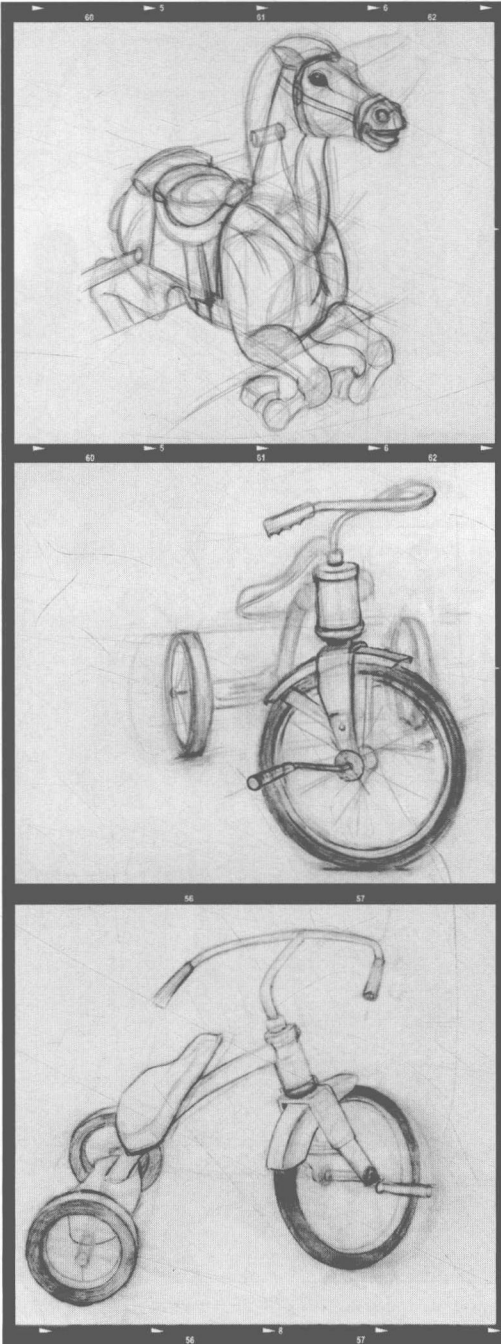
I began this drawing text with the understanding that dozens of texts on the subject already exist. What this book has that the others do not is a focus on basic rendering skills and the spatial understanding needed for translating three-dimensional perceptions onto a two-dimensional surface.

Drawing from Observation builds upon the perceptual platform that was constructed in the fifteenth century by Brunelleschi, Alberti, Piero, and Leonardo. Although Modernist art movements of the last two hundred years have challenged the Renaissance notion of rational illusionistic space, there is tremendous value in learning to draw a "realistic" image from observation. Perceptual drawing offers the opportunity to develop insights into the very mechanisms of visual perception and is a versatile tool for visual problem-solving in every artistic discipline. And, in that it works well as a conceptual baseline against which to compare and contrast alternative aesthetic and conceptual approaches, it may even shed some light



PREFACE

PREFACE

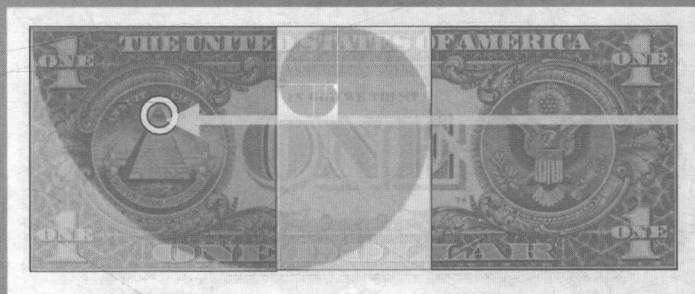
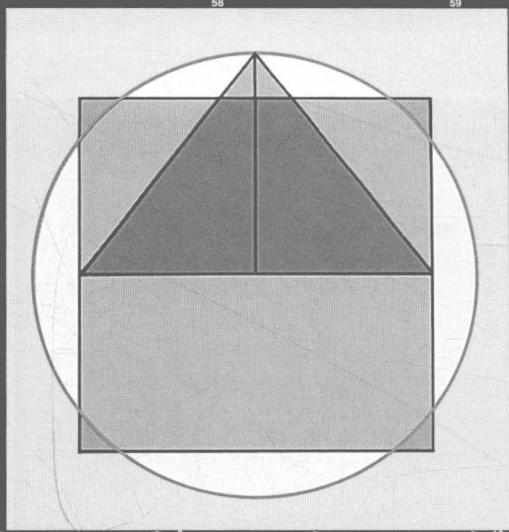
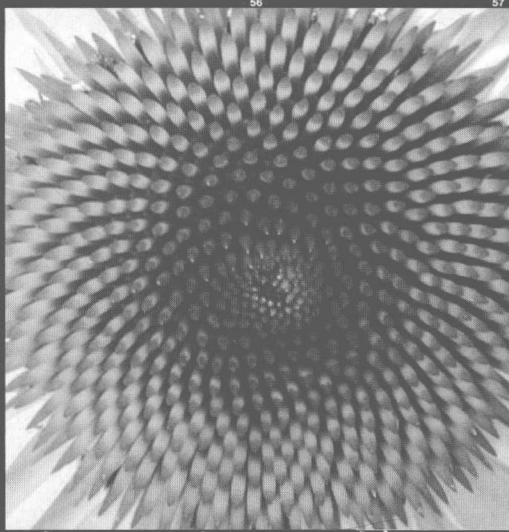


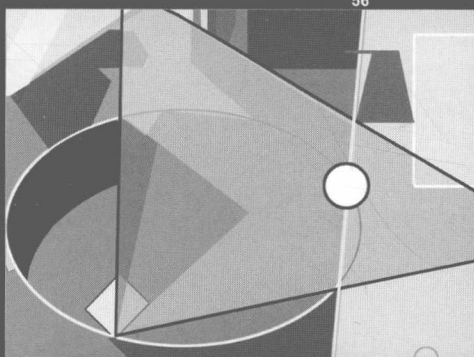
on the possible motivations of those who have consciously chosen to make art without it.

Drawing from Observation grew out of the belief that a thorough understanding of perceptual drawing is fundamental to artistic self-awareness.

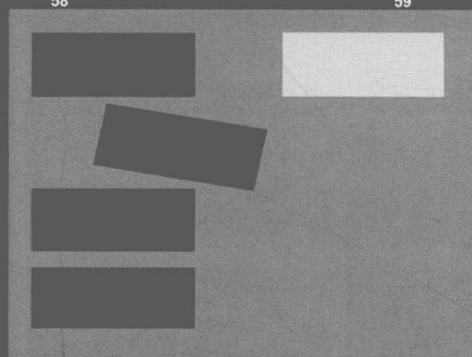
As a practicing artist, I understand and vigorously defend the preeminence of freedom in an art-making environment. However, as a teacher of art, I have come to understand the parallel importance of discipline, visual sensitivity, patience, eye/hand coordination, a rigorous work ethic, and a solid conceptual base as the essential tools needed to take full advantage of one's freedom.

This book systematically shows students how to develop their ability to accurately render what they see. Numerous drawings and diagrams support the verbal explanations. Students who complete the entire text will have gained a solid foundation for more advanced work.





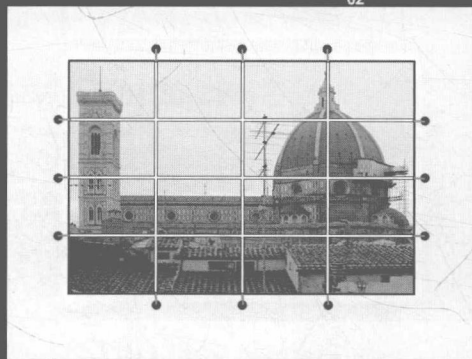
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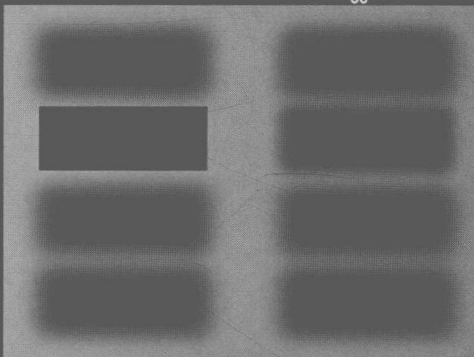
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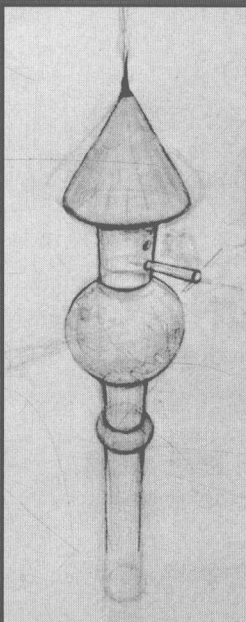


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CHAPTER 1 GETTING STARTED

Heightened sensitivity	1
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"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Chinese proverb

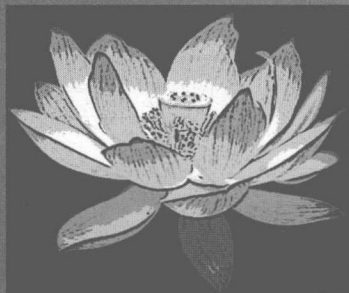
Sensitivity to the touch of the drawing tool to the drawing surface and the ability to discriminate subtle changes in the marks as the tool is "drawn" over the surface are the most important components of the drawing process.

These are very basic sensitivities but ones that, because of the refinement and energy they require, are both sophisticated and challenging. It is challenging to invest extraordinary concentration in an activity that is generally perceived as utilitarian. Focusing attention on something as routine as using a hand-held tool to make marks on paper requires that you temporarily detach yourself from the distractions of your overstimulating environment and devote your attention to the simple experience of direct sensory awareness. Drawing demands an active and purposeful participation like that which is alluded to in the timeless Roman admonition **carpe diem** (seize the day). This phrase is a concise exhortation to actively explore, experience, and embrace each unfolding moment. Such focused concentration on immediate experience lies at the

CHAPTER 1: GETTING STARTED

very heart of the drawing process. It also alludes to parallels between the act of drawing and the life-affirming tenets of Zen philosophy. Both Zen and drawing are all about fresh and direct seeing. They also share in the understanding that beauty and wonder are accessible through simple and routine activities, if and when you care for and identify with what it is that you are doing. Drawing, like Zen, is active, engaged, and purposeful awareness.

Drawing relies on heightened sensitivity toward tactile and visual experience in ways that are simple and routine. It is important that you understand from the outset that the effectiveness of a drawing is, first and foremost, determined by the richness and variety of the marks from which it is made. Awareness of, sensitivity to, and control over the mark-making characteristics of the drawing tool and the surface texture of the paper are what determine the vitality of a drawing. The amount of visual interest generated by a drawing depends primarily on the energy, clarity, variation, rhythm, and immediacy of its constituent marks. Marks first make meaning by preserving, documenting, and communicating the sensory experience of the act of drawing itself. The very first level of content in a drawing is always in the marks themselves.



THE FLOWER SERMON

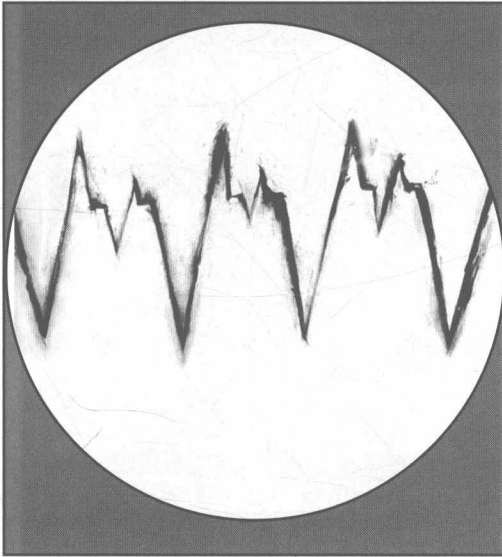
The story goes that Siddhartha Gautama, alias the Buddha, decided to use a prop, a Zen tool, for one of his sermons. Having gone up on a hillside to preach, he silently held up a lotus flower. Everyone in the crowd below awaited his words. Everyone, that is, except one person, Kashyapa. Kashyapa smiled. He had caught on to something. Gautama walked down to the smiling Kashyapa, handed him the flower, and conferred upon him the honor, the power, and the task of being the first Zen patriarch.

Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, by Ron Di Santo and Tom Steele

"Beauty is the expression of the rapture of being alive."

Joseph Campbell

"Art without life is a poor affair."
Henry James



1.1 Oscilloscopes, medical devices that monitor vital signs of patients, mirror the fluctuating energy and irregular patterns found in biological life. In a drawing, fluctuations in line quality can incorporate much of that same feeling of energy and vitality.

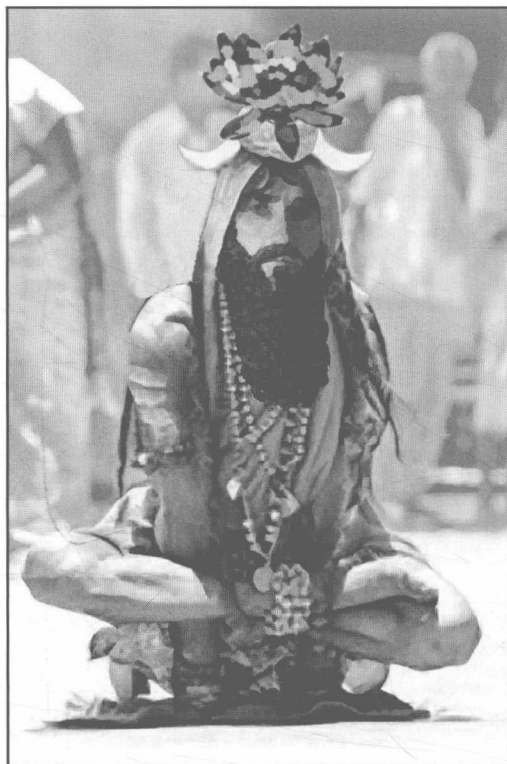
"The overall effectiveness of a drawing is, first and foremost, determined by the quality, variety, and sensitivity of the marks from which it is made."

Sensitivity to sensory stimulation is an excellent first test to determine whether an organism is vital or necrotic (lifeless). Healthy cells react to stimulation; necrotic cells do not. Your quotient of being alive, then, is in large measure proportional to your **receptivity** and **responsiveness** to sensory stimulation. These two indicators of vitality serve to reflect the fullness with which you experience life. They are also essential elements in our current drawing investigation. Line variation is capable of mimicking the fluctuating energy found in biological life. Like the constantly changing "blips" on an oscilloscope that is monitoring the vital signs of a patient (**Fig. 1.1**), a line that switches from thick to thin, light to dark, angular to flowing, rough edges to smooth provides a perceptual spark that energizes a sensitively rendered drawing. The physical energy that produces a drawing is recorded and crystallized within the marks of the drawing. Once completed, the marks become vehicles through which the responsive viewer reconstitutes a real time experience of the movement, energy, rhythm, character, and "feel" of the original drawing experience.

The previous references to sensations of movement, energy, and rhythm that can be found in a drawing are more than metaphorical.

CHAPTER 1: GETTING STARTED

Visual stimulation, whether real or imagined, can affect both the **psyche** (mind) and **soma** (body). Indian fakirs (ascetic Hindu monks known for their extraordinary mental and physical discipline) (**Fig. 1.2**) are able, through intense visual imaging, to cause fluctuations in specific body functions that Western science had long held to be beyond the control of the conscious mind. In one particular demonstration, a monk raised the skin temperature of one hand while lowering it in the other by means of concentrated visualization. He imagined that he was holding fire and ice, respectively, and was so effective in his imagining that his body responded accordingly. While fakirs use extraordinarily disciplined visualization techniques to achieve this remarkable control over what are otherwise considered “involuntary” functions, we can all relate to this experience. Tears, chills, sweaty palms, goose bumps, a warm flush, stomachache, heartache, a pounding heart, physical disorientation, or a sense of general well-being are common responses to internalized imagery. Our ability to respond to visual stimulation with noticeable physical reactions in our muscles, tendons, joints, and organs is, in fact, at the very core of aesthetic sensitivity. Internalized images generate body sensations that can be



1.2 A fakir, an ascetic Indian Hindu or Sufi holy man, is an initiate of a strict spiritual brotherhood that lives on charity and follows an extensive regimen that traditionally includes physical meditation in the form of seclusion, sleep deprivation, and fasting. The word *fakir* derives from the Arabic word for poverty. Unfortunately, the term is also often applied to wandering Indian magicians who claim supernatural powers as they engage in illusionistic stunts like the Indian rope trick (climbing a rope that rises unsupported from the ground) and levitation that is more theatrical than spiritual.